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ABSTRACT

The use of prose models in the English as a second language writing class has been criticized for promoting product-based rather than process-based learning. However, the process-centered approach has a number of drawbacks, and prose models can solve some of these inherent problems. Properly designed models can be an essential part of a writing class if their purpose is to show how writers with limited English proficiency can solve a communication problem in an acceptable, idiomatic, and concise way. Students can learn a little about rhetorical patterns by studying a dozen or so models, but to increase the range of content areas in which students can operate and to build up an inventory of adaptable cliches, they should be exposed to many more models. By studying a large number of models and solutions, students realize that writing is more than the application of a few simple formulas. They see the communicative value of the structures they learn and appreciate the kinds of communication problems writing can solve. (MSE)

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PROSE MODELS AND THE ESL WRITING LESSON

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The use of prose models in the ESL writing class has been criticized for promoting "product-based" rather than "process-based" learning. Properly designed models can, however, be an essential part of a writing class if their purpose is to show how writers with limited English proficiency can solve a communication problem in an acceptable, idiomatic, and concise way. This paper identifies some of the limitations of the process-centered approach to teaching writing, explores the role of prose models in the writing lesson, and offers guidelines for selecting or writing prose models.

Researchers such as Zamel (1983) and Spack (1984) favor a "Process-Centered" approach in ESL writing courses and maintain that this approach signals a paradigm shift in the teaching of composition away from product-based approaches that emphasize the study of rhetorical patterns and editing skills. One casualty of this approach may be the study of prose models. Although some advocates of a process-centered approach incorporate the study of models into the writing lesson (see Escholz 1980 and Watson-Reekie 1982), the temptation may be as teachers become attracted to this approach to deemphasize the study of models. However, the study of models can remain an essential part of the ESL writing class and may in fact solve some of the problems inherent in process-centered approaches.

Process-centered teaching focuses on the act of composing. In its most extreme form, the teacher abandons all attempts to teach language structure systematically or to favor any

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rhetorical model. This approach asks the question, "How do writers write?" rather than "What do writers write?" In such a course, students take each paper through a series of stages. Early on in the composing process, students may practice free writing, pre-writing, brainstorming, and grouping. Later they shape the paper and rewrite it. Finally, they revise, edit, and polish. At each stage, the students get feedback from their instructor or peers. This feedback motivates students to modify their papers as they discover what they want to say and better understand the needs of the reader. Some teachers may have the students work on one essay the entire course and suspend class after the first few weeks in favor of "conferencing." The approach aims to remove emotional and creative blocks that make students reluctant to write and to help them develop efficient composiong processes.

This approach has many strengths. First of all, students are involved in a purposeful communicative activity where they must use the language they know and acquire more language as they compose. Second, students recognize that composing essays is not a linear, one-step process in which one merely writes thoughts on paper but rather a complex process of discovery or invention requiring many drafts and revisions. Student essays may improve simply because they are forced to spend more time on papers. Krashen (1984) feels that this approach is especially useful for linguistically competent (or well-read) students who can recognize good prose but who have inefficient composing processes.

The process-centered approach is certainly appealing but it is not without problems. First, the approach relies heavily on teacher or peer feedback throughout each stage of the writing process. This can be revealing to students but since successful writers rarely get feedback on their writing until they have finished, it seems unlikely that this feedback is essential for the acquisition of writing skills. Feedback should be a part of any writing class, but there is no evidence that it works better if students receive feedback once during and once following the writing of a paper or many times. The question is not how much we can help students to develop or polish a particular composition but how well they write once they are weaned from the nurturing of the writing instructor. Furthermore, supplying feedback takes time and may lead to a decrease in the number of class assignments as overworked teachers seek to reduce their workload. Finally, it is difficult to get students below the advanced level to revise papers beyond surface-level correction.

It is also important to note that most competent writers (excluding professionals) have done little writing. How do writers who do little writing and rarely get feedback internalize enough of the language to write fluently? The answer seems to be reading. Krashen (1984) reports research suggesting that good writers acquire the written code by reading although they must do

a minimum amount of writing to develop an efficient composing process. Smith (1983) wonders where writers get all the facts and examples that they must accumulate in order to compose a text. He concludes it must be through reading. Widdowson (1983) hypothesizes that idiomatization is so common that in order to compose we must have already internalized not only much of the structure of language but also a set of "adaptable cliches" that do not need to be composed upon each use but can be called upon.

This link between reading and writing is where the process-centered approach offers no particular advantages. By equating the act of writing with the art of invention, the approach offers little help with the part of English that is already invented, the part that is determined by convention and comprises what might be called the "idiom." If students learn to write mainly by writing drafts and testing them against a supposed audience, students must, in a sense, invent a system of written expression. If this sounds reasonable, then we must be assuming that the conventions for writing can be arrived at intuitively, or that they have some natural basis. But, in fact, each type of writing we do is shaped by convention, each with its idiosyncracies. Compare, for example, how we write a grocery list, a memo to a colleague, a letter to the editor, a greeting at the bottom of a Christmas card, a request for a duplicate bank statement, or even a suicide note. Each has its own purpose, its own set of cliches, traditions, and expectations. Even experienced writers, when attempting new tasks, will turn to the writing of others to get a feel for the new genre. If we experienced writers do not invent everything anew, it is unreasonable to expect ESL students to invent a system for forming text in a language they do not speak well.

To write well, students must command an inventory of linguistic structures, cliches and text-forming strategies that they can summon at will. Reading seems to be the most likely means by which writers acquire such knowledge, but ESL students have little time to do massive amounts of reading. We need to have them read in a selective way that requires them to see how experienced writers put their thoughts into prose. Part of the answer may be the study of carefully written prose models.

The use of prose models has been criticized for a number of reasons. Critics claim that models are product-based rather than process-based; that is, models suggest that writing proceeds linearly from idea to product without revisions. Second, prose models often contain artificial writing. This is the case when models are written to display a grammatical pattern. For example, a paragraph designed to illustrate the use of adverbial clauses of time may exaggerate the text-forming value of adverbial clauses and encourage students to produce an excessive number of these clauses. The third criticism is that the models approach forces the student to use a limited and inhibiting set of rhetorical patterns. Models may suggest that all paragraphs

or essays must classify, define, compare and contrast, argue, examplify, or narrate. Experienced writers simply do not limit themselves to these patterns.

These criticisms are valid and should lead us to view cautiously the use of models. They can be dismissed, however, if we design and use models in careful ways.

First of all, models should show how an experienced writer solves a communication problem. They are best presented as solutions, not as patterns. One successful application is to have students convert information presented in graphic (or two dimensional) form into linear form, or prose. The table, for example, compares the planets Earth and Venus.

TABLE 1

WITH RESPECT TO:	EARTH	VENUS
AVERAGE SURFACE TEMPERATURE ($^{\circ}$F)	70	900
DIAMETER AT EQUATOR	7920 MILES	7524 MILES
COMPOSITION OF ATMOSPHERE	MAINLY NITROGEN AND OXYGEN	CARBON DIOXIDE
DISTANCE FROM SUN	94 MILLION MILES	68 MILLION MILES
ATMOSPHERIC PRESSURE AT SURFACE	13 LBS. PER SQ. INCH	90 TIMES DENSER THAN EARTH'S

The task here is to fashion this information into a unified and coherent paragraph. Most intermediate students, however, will lack efficient means for doing so and may produce such a mishmash that the teacher will panic and launch into a series of grammar exercises. This practice, however, is defeatist and abandons the principle that language is best acquired by using it to negotiate meaning and to accomplish things. This is where the model/solution comes in.

The following paragraph shows how an experienced writer might solve the problem. Although specific structures and a rhetorical pattern are apparent, its purpose is not to display patterns or to teach structures but to reveal a solution to a communication problem.

> Although the Earth and Venus are about the same size and both are relatively near the sun, the two planets differ in important ways. First of all, Venus is much hotter than the Earth. It has an average surface temperature of 900° F. while the Earth averages 70° F. Secondly, the two planets have different atmospheres. The atmosphere of Venus is composed mostly of carbon dioxide, while the Earth's atmosphere is mainly nitrogen and oxygen. Venus's atmosphere is also about 90 times denser than the Earth's.

This paragraph is useful because it solves a number of communication problems. Note that the table includes both similarities and differences. If students simply list sentences, their paragraphs will lack unity and coherence. The model reveals a concise way to focus on differences by subordinating the similarities with the word <u>although</u>. The paragraph also handles a messy problem typical of comparison and contrast essays--that of writing about two subjects at the same time--by keeping <u>Venus</u> and <u>Earth</u> in the subject position throughout the paragraph. It uses the simple structure "Venus does this, while the Earth does that." Experience indicates that students will often avoid such simple patterns because they do not trust them to express so much information. Models help them develop a trust in concise writing.

It is not enough for models to solve a communication problem. They should show how a speaker with limited English proficiency, as opposed to a professional writer, can do so. The Venus/Earth model, which is designed for high-intermediate students, reads smoothly and is reasonably concise without resorting to complicated sentence patterns that intermediate students could not control. The model aims to develop a trust in text-forming devices that students can adapt to similar writing tasks.

When dealing with students of lower ability, we do not need to resort to unnatural models in order to avoid complexity. Instead we simplify the task. If students would be overwhelmed by the point-by-point comparison in the Venus/Earth paragraph, then we simplify the task by having them describe each entity separately.

> Although Venus and Earth are about the same size and relatively close to the sun, both planets differ in important ways. The Earth has an average surface temperature of 70° Fahrenheit. Its atmosphere is composed mainly of nitrogen and oxygen, and the pressure at the surface is 13 lbs. per square inch. Venus, on the other hand, has an average surface temperature of 900°

> Fahrenheit. Its atmosphere is primarily carbon dioxide, and the atmospheric pressure at its surface is 90 times greater than the earth's.

This paragraph maintains coherence by keeping given information near the beginning of each sentence and by conjoining sentences with and . It requires just one overt transitional element, on the other hand. The original paragraph has a more complex structure. It uses five overt transitional expressions--first of all, secondly, while (twice) and also . It devotes two sentences, (2 and 4), to stating the general respect being contrasted. It is interesting that it is not necessarily the sophistication of the writer that determines the complexity of syntax but rather the nature of the task. The language of the original paragraph is more complicated because the task is more complicated.

For more advanced students, we can increase the complexity of the task. For example, we might ask students to indicate the source of the information.

> Mariner 5 in 1967 confirmed that Venus's atmosphere is primarily carbon dioxide.

Or we may insist that students explain the relationship between two facts. Note how the complexity increases.

> Mariner 5 in 1967 confirmed that Venus's atmosphere was primarily carbon dioxide and therefore must exert pressure at the planet's surface of up to 90 times that of Earth.

By adjusting models to reflect the complexity of the task, models will sound natural. If we simplify models without simplifying the task, they may become stilted and incoherent, as the following simplification demonstrates:

> Mariner 5 explored Venus in 1967. It studied the planet. Venus's atmosphere is primarily carbon dioxide. It exerts pressure at the planet's surface of up to 90 times greater than the Earth's.

So model paragraphs must offer natural-sounding solutions to communication problems by employing linguistic tools that are available to writers with limited English proficiency. Models must also display concise, economical language in order to counter the learner's natural propensity toward verbosity. Inexperienced writers, it seems, will consciously attempt to write complicated sentences because they believe they are required to (see Richmond 1984). But good writers write complex sentences when they need to express complex meanings. Because of this misunderstanding, prose models must make apparent the

economy and text-forming potential of language, not its potential for verbosity.

To satisfy these criteria, it is important to follow certain stylistic guidelines when writing or selecting prose models.

1. The writing of inexperienced writers tends to break down when they attempt to combine the general and specific. For this reason, models should express general statements and supporting specifics in separate sentences. The following model from a freshman composition text (Lannon 1983) is unsuitable for intermediate ESL students.

> (1) The Satanic belief system, not surprisingly, is the antithesis of Chrisianity. (2) Their theory of the universe, their cosmology, is based upon the pagan notion that the desired end state is a return to a pagan awareness of their humanity. (3) This is in sharp contrast to the transcendental goals of Christianity.

This text works, but even if we ignore the difficulty of the subject matter, it is unlikely that intermediate students could successfully adapt this model to their writing. Consider this revision:

> ... (2) First, their theory of the universe, or cosmology, is different. (3) Satanists believe that the desired state is a return to pagan awareness of their humanity. (4) Christians, on the other hand, believe that the desired end is to transcend nature ...

Here sentence (2) contains a general statement, and sentences (3) and (4) express specifics. This version communicates the same information as the original yet is more adaptable and easier for students to control.

2. When listing or enumerating, models should favor parallelism to maintain coherence. Notice how the revised version of the paragraph on Satanism uses parallelism to form a cohesive link between sentences (3) and (4) with the pattern "X believes that ..." Models should exploit these opportunities for parallel expression because even the most advanced students will consciously avoid structural repetition even if doing so produces awkward, ungrammatical, or verbose constructions (see Richmond 1984).

3. Prose models should avoid heavy nominalization (particularly in the subject position) and keep the bulk of the information in the predicate. The first group of sentences that follows is nominal heavy. The second is better.

Nominal Heavy

In 1974, the average number of miles per gallon for U.S. passenger cars was 13.43.
The number of immigrants who came to the U.S. was over 29 million.

Improved

In 1974, U.S. passenger cars averaged 13.43. miles per gallon.
Over 29 million immigrants came to the U.S.

When students attempt nominal-heavy sentences, the result is often syntactic breakdown. Once again models teach students to trust these simpler, more concise patterns.

4. Models should be presented as solutions to specific problems, not as examples of general rhetorical patterns. For example, the following paragraph employs chronological order and is suitable as an example of a short biography.

> After teaching school in New Jersey, Clara Barton went to Washington D.C. When the Civil War started, she organized supply and nursing services for the sick and wounded in the Union Army. After the war ended, she was in charge of a government-sponsored search for missing soldiers ...

However, this paragraph is not easily adapted to all tasks involving chronology. To express the information in the table, we need a model that describes trends, reports statistics, identifies increases or decreases, and marks the passing of years.

TABLE 2
ANNUAL SUGAR CONSUMPTION IN DENMARK

1880	1911	1934
29 POUNDS	82 POUNDS	113 POUNDS

The model that follows does just that.

> From 1940 to 1970, beef consumption increased dramatically in the U.S. In 1940, the average American consumed 43 pounds of beef each year. Ten years later, this amount increased to 60 pounds per year and by 1960 to 85 pounds per year. By 1970, the average American consumed 118 pounds of beef, almost three times more than in

1940. This increase was made possible by increases in farm production.

Note that this model employs, to use Widdowson's phrase, "adaptable cliches." The expressions below, all of which occur in the model, are adaptable to many simple descriptions of trends including the trend displayed in the table.

increased dramatically
from 1940 to 1970,
in 1940
the average American consumed
ten years later
each year
by 1970
three times more than in 1940
this increase
increases in farm production

Students may recognize these expressions but will have difficulty calling upon them. This kind of model, therefore, aims to expand the linguistic resources available to students. Consider how difficult it would be to write this paragraph if the above expressions were unavailable. Intermediate students, of course, will not have internalized most of these cliches.

5. Models are important for revealing the cliches that operate within content areas, but we must not imply that an idiosyncratic expression can be modified to fit other situations. The sentence below works but is too idiosyncratic to be useful in a model for intermediate students.

The years between 1940 and 1970 saw beef consumption skyrocket to an unparalleled level .

We can say that something increased slightly, noticeably, geometrically, significantly and so forth, but we would have difficulty expressing these nuances by modifying the underlined expression. We would not say, for instance, that something skyrocketed slightly to a significantly unparalleled level. Because of these difficulties, authentic texts might not serve as useful models for intermediate students. Professional writers will naturally operate outside these guidelines and attempt tasks that are more difficult than we would ask of our students. Published work simply does not provide realistic solutions to the tasks we give our students.

These guidelines severely restrict for pedagogical reasons the type of prose models that intermediate students should study. But these restrictions need not apply to the selection of reading material, for literate people are able to read and comprehend a much wider selection of prose than they are capable of producing. When they write, their range is more limited, but because they

have control over the form of the message, they learn to get by with a limited inventory of linguistic forms and text-forming strategies. So we must not expect students to have the same range when they write as when they read, and for this reason we can follow different guidelines when selecting reading material.

How many models should students study? To learn a little about rhetorical patterns, a dozen might do. But to increase the range of content areas in which students can operate and to build up an inventory of adaptable cliches, we must expose them to dozens if not hundreds. By studying a large number of models/solutions, students realize that writing is more than the application of a few simple formulas. They see the communicative value of the structures they learn and appreciate the kinds of communication problems that writing can solve. By getting a glimpse of the product, they can learn to see the act of writing as a process of discovering solutions--an invention that is shaped by convention.

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